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SUBJECT: HORTICULTURAL HIT TRANSCENDS POLITICS, FOR A TIME

REF: A. (06) CHIANG MAI 19 (NIGHT SAFARI QUESTIONS TRAIL THAKSIN)

[1](#)B. (05) CHIANG MAI 233 (THANKS BUT. CHIANG MAI STRUGGLES WITH DEVELOPMENT DESIGNED IN BANGKOK)

[1](#)1. Summary. The three-month-long Royal Flora Ratchaphruek International Horticultural Exposition in Chiang Mai that closed Jan. 31 scored a big hit with the Thai public, drawing attendance beyond anyone's expectations. While the event managed to rise above politics thanks to its association with the King, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's role in staging the expo in his home town shades the aftermath. End summary.

[1](#)2. Pushed under Thaksin's leadership and opened on Nov. 1 after his ouster, the Royal Flora expo initially drew media fire for low attendance, expensive food and smelly toilets - criticism likely augmented by the post-coup inclination to paint all Thaksin projects in dark hues. By December, however, Thais from all over the country flocked to Chiang Mai to catch the experience, even as foreign tourists mostly stayed away. Total attendance for the three months was reported at 3.7 million.

[1](#)3. Despite the fact that decisions on the future of the 188-acre site remain to be made and even though the true environmental and financial costs of Ratchaphruek may never be clear, most Thais perceived the hugely popular event as a worthy way to mark HM the King's 60th year on the throne and usher in a year of celebrations surrounding his 80th birthday.

[1](#)4. The must-see popularity of the Royal Flora expo also boosted the adjoining Night Safari, another Thaksin "gift" to his home town built against the opposition of environmentalists on national park land at the foot of Doi Suthep (reftels). Explanations for the Royal Flora's triumph included its celebration of the King and his sufficiency policy and a dose of related social pressure to be part of the royal salute. Nor did it hurt that the event was wildly hyped. Even as the expo was turning visitors away a week before the end, newspapers carried expensive ads touting the "miracle" of Rathchapruek.

---Educational enrichment via tour bus---

[1](#)5. Politicians of all stripes saw the floral fest as a chance to garner support. A former TRT MP from Chiang Rai reported that many groups of villagers enjoyed organized free trips to the horticultural show courtesy of politicians and government units at the municipal, district, and provincial levels. Trip sponsors included both supporters and foes of the post-coup Council for National Security (CNS), suggesting that flower power can sometimes trump politics. Government employees also took advantage of "study trips" to visit the expo on official funds; Chiang Mai Rajabhat University reported bus loads of teachers stopping briefly at the campus to justify an official trip before heading out to see the show.

[1](#)6. Even the Thai military tried to cash in by offering Burmese counterparts from the Township Border Committee (TBC) at Mae Sai-Tachilek a trip to the expo, along with their families. One such trip reportedly backfired when a police checkpoint discovered and removed illegal travelers on the bus.

---Picking apart the party---

[1](#)7. Now that the popular expo is over, critics have started to reemerge. Operating costs reportedly had to be supplemented by additional government funds as well as an assessment on local administrative organizations. Villagers living near the expo site complained that organizers failed to honor promises to hire local residents and protested over poor garbage handling and excessive noise. Bangkok's "Nation" newspaper trumpeted "Floral expo ends with meager profit" and concluded that the expo failed in its horticultural objectives while succeeding in celebrating

the King's reign and promoting Lanna culture. A local NGO filed charges against the Thaksin administration for failing to obtain permission to use the national park land and for irregularities in contract bids; the cases are now pending investigations by the Agriculture Ministry and the National Counter-Corruption Commission.

18. Comment: Despite initial wariness about Royal Flora Ratchapruek as yet another wasteful project of the Thaksin government, most Thais took it to their hearts. Chiang Mai businesses, hotels and restaurants profited financially from the three-month tourist magnet, even though residents were unhappy with the traffic jams and tour buses that jammed their city during the November-January period. In the aftermath, the former Prime Minister's opponents are calling attention to budget irregularities and environmental encroachment while others believe that the expo further strengthened Thaksin's image and base among local business beneficiaries. The final reckoning may depend, like much else, on Thaksin's lot.

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